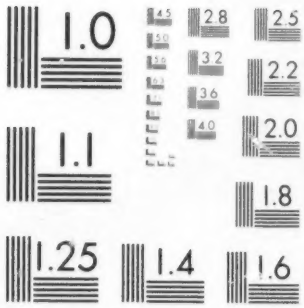

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ABSTRACT

College faculty members will welcome a writing lab when they think it will help students perform at an acceptable level in their classes. For this reason, a major task of the writing lab is to convince the faculty that teaching writing is everyone's job. However, even when other faculty members concede this, they are often hampered by three common misconceptions about the writing process and how to improve student efforts: teaching writing on the college level is a remedial task, writing is a test rather than a learning process, and writing is a technology concerned with stylistic niceties and grammatical correctness rather than with the organization and development of ideas. All three of these misconceptions underlie the idea that teaching is someone else's job and all lead to counterproductive approaches to teaching writing. The writing lab gains acceptance when faculty members recognize that the development of writing skills is an ongoing process for which writing labs are a focus. (TJ)

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Introduction

The success of any writing lab depends on campus-wide faculty support. Such support means not only the willingness to refer students to the Lab, but an intelligent concern for teaching writing as a part of every subject. As we all know, there is a tendency on the part of most college faculty, even those who teach literature, to think that teaching writing is someone else's job. Often disappointed in their expectations of what a student "ought" to be able to do, these professors will welcome a writing lab which they think will remediate deficiencies so that students will be prepared to perform at an acceptable level in their classes. Thus the first step in faculty education is to persuade faculty that teaching writing is everyone's job. Students will value writing only if they see its value in relation to other disciplines, particularly their own special interests. Furthermore, writing is best learned in context since "good writing" can never really be separated out from thinking about a subject.

But, I have found that, even when other faculty concede that writing is their job too, they are often hampered by common misconceptions about the writing process and how to improve student efforts. These common misconceptions

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are detrimental to student writing and lead to frustration on all sides, not least of all in the Writing Lab, where instructors must try diplomatically to cope with the poor instruction of other faculty and where we often see students either turned off or enthusiastically imbued with wrong-headed notions about how to improve their own writing (for example, the otherwise reasonably bright student who wants to spend his time reviewing grammatical terminology). So active faculty participation in a writing program entails faculty education about the writing process as well, and this is an important way in which writing labs can become faculty resources.

At RPI, the Writing Center program is attempting to meet this need. Fifty percent of my time as Director is spent working with faculty. In my first year, I spent time simply meeting with faculty individually and in groups to persuade them to emphasize writing in their courses, to use me as a consultant, and to make use of the Center as a backup resource for their own teaching efforts. In my second year, I have done extensive consulting with individual faculty members concerning the writing assignments they give their students. I advise them on designing assignments and teaching methods. In my many conversations with faculty during the past two years, I have often been impressed by the importance they placed on writing in technical and scientific work, by the significant amount of writing demanded of upperclassmen in these technical subjects, and by the excellent teaching techniques developed by some faculty. But I have also been privately appalled by the misconceptions held by many professors which lead to bad teaching or non-teaching of writing. I have spent the past two years analyzing these misconceptions and have become more convinced than ever that large-scale faculty education efforts are needed in order to have an effective writing lab. During our third year of operation, the Writing Center at RPI will be offering a series of seminars and workshops

for faculty in order to educate them about the nature of the writing process and the learning process.

There are three common misconceptions about writing that are prevalent among college professors. The first is the idea that teaching writing on the college level is a remedial task rather than a developmental one. The second is that writing is a test rather than a learning process. The third is that writing is a technology concerned with stylistic niceties and grammatical correctness rather than with the organization and development of ideas. These three basic misconceptions lead to not teaching writing at all or poor teaching methods that turn off students. I believe that no writing program can be effective unless faculty as a whole are educated along with the students about the developmental, humanistic processes of writing.

I.

First, let's look at the idea that writing is a "remedial" subject on the college level. High school teachers are blamed for preparing students inadequately. This attitude leads to not teaching writing at all, but just making assignments, and bemoaning the results. Recently, many college professors have taken the approach of not even giving written assignments because the results are so poor. This attitude that writing is a remedial subject also creates a great deal of insecurity and negativity on the part of the student. They get the message that "their writing is lousy and shameful and there's nothing they can do about it."

This attitude stems from a misconception of the nature of verbal skills and the process of verbal development and an ignorance of significant research that has been done in linguistics, language-learning, and the development of writing skills. In fact maturity in writing ability coincides with growth in cognitive ability, a development which is not completed at the end of high

school. (Piaget's level of formal operations is not attained by some students until the age of 19 or 20.) College students must undergo an intensive period of training and growth if they are to develop professional-level cognitive and writing skills. This means that writing on the college level is necessary to intellectual growth and is by no means a remedial subject.

I also point to the research of Kellogg Hunt and O'Donnell and the sentence-combining research of Mellon, O'Hare, Daiker, Kerek, and Morenberg as empirical evidence of the developmental nature of writing and the continued development of writing ability after high school and throughout adulthood. Syntactic maturity can be measured quantitatively, and it has been shown that the difference in syntactic maturity between a 12th grader and a professional adult writer is as great as the difference between a 4th grader and a 12th grader. These findings show us that a lot of development should be fostered in the college years in which we are preparing students for work as professionals.

Furthermore, those in the humanistic disciplines ought to be most aware that writing is the only way that students learn to synthesize information, the highest form of cognitive learning in Bloom's taxonomy. Depriving students of writing experience and of guidance in writing is depriving them of full cognitive development as adult human beings. Writing is a necessary part of humanistic education. A human who does not write is not really an educated man or woman. Therefore, faculty need to be educated about the developmental nature of writing and the necessity of teaching writing on the college level. We must all teach writing if we want our students to attain the highest levels of cognitive development and if we want them to be fully educated in the humanistic tradition.

II.

The second major misconception about writing is the testing orientation. That is the idea that writing is that final typed product on the page which the teacher rates acceptable or defective and returns. Student response is displayed and judged only in terms of the end product, and the product is then passed or failed without any consideration given to how to produce the desired result, or what went into the production, or what individual differences may have led to different results. The student himself becomes a product to be graded and the teacher merely a gate-keeper, not a guide. Writing in this context is a product that demands only editing and proofreading skills to attain acceptability. The teacher's role is to mark the errors the student missed. Thus the teaching of writing is reduced to error avoidance and error correction. Again, little teaching and learning takes place in this context (since only the end product is emphasized), and the teacher's role is a negative one likely to turn off students. The students are asked to turn in products that come back red-penciled. Typically, students take a quick look at the grade and chuck it, the most rational response to this type of teaching and grading.

Faculty need to be made aware that writing is a process far more complex than error avoidance. First of all, writing is a communication process that needs to be taught and evaluated in those terms. I'm speaking of the rhetorical context of writer, audience, subject, and purpose which is rarely defined for students in subject matter courses and often leads to a certain kind of nonsense writing. Of course, when writing is seen as a product or test, the idea of communication is completely forgotten by the writer. Also, as all of us writing teachers know, the composition of a particular piece of writing is a process consisting of many steps which may be summarized as planning,

pre-writing, drafting, editing, proofreading, "publication," feedback, and revision. To teach writing effectively the teacher must guide students through the entire process, not just the editing process. And the learning process is identical with the writing process: write/feedback/rewrite.

Therefore in order to teach better writing in their subject matter courses, professors need to consider the entire process and guide their students through it. They should try to establish a rhetorical context when making assignments, allow students to turn in pre-writing and planning material, and allow opportunities for revision.

III.

The third prevalent misconception among college faculty is that writing is a technology concerned with stylistic niceties and grammar correction rather than the organization and development of ideas. There is a tendency to think that ideas can be separated from the writing and evaluated in the abstract and that good writing means learning style and grammar rules and applying them to the subject--like an external technique. Again this results in poor teaching which emphasizes relatively minor aspects of writing and error correction rather than the larger and far more significant writing skills that really produce effective communication and analysis. Again this view gives students a negative view of writing--it's secondary and it's a petty skill, concerned with minute proofreading skills that could probably be done by a secretary. Students are also left in the dark about how to become effective writers which, in the academic setting, means mastering the analytical thought process we call critical thinking. The goal of all college education is critical thinking, most often displayed through writing. So a teacher who refuses to show students how to think, how to organize and

present ideas analytically, is refusing to teach the higher cognitive processes--Piaget's formal operations. These teachers are also misleading students into thinking that writing is just a matter of "dressing up" ideas in prose rather than a particular form of thinking. Faculty could get far better results in the assignments their students turn in if they gave just a little time to explaining how to organize, how to analyze, how to develop, support, give reasons, and if they commented on this aspect of student writing more frequently than on word choice, verb tenses, and spelling errors or typos. It is important to realize that every piece of writing--no matter what the subject--always involves the whole person every time. That is why it is a humanistic activity, not a technology.

Conclusion

All three of the basic misconceptions I've discussed underlie the idea that teaching is someone else's job--the specialists in remediation and the technology of writing. All three lead to counterproductive approaches to teaching writing. And all three attitudes make the job of the writing lab more difficult. Superficially, it may seem that this situation would create a thriving lab, based on the idea that the lab offers expert help and specialized technologies to remediate problems. But a lab operating in this conceptual framework only perpetuates the problem. As long as faculty and students maintain these attitudes, student writing will be a "problem" that we always have with us, like the poor, one in which the more "technology" we apply, the more "problems" we have. These attitudes also create a negative environment in which the writing lab has to operate: both students and faculty will see the Lab as a necessary evil, one which would be eliminated in an ideal college setting. Thus, the Lab is continually forced to fight for its existence.

What I've been trying to say is that the answer to the problem of improving student writing is not to accept an intellectual framework that emphasizes intensified remediation as the role of a writing lab, but to work for a conceptual change which makes development of writing skills an accepted on-going process which the Writing Lab helps to foster for everyone. I realize that it is difficult to change these mind-sets because our society as a whole is guilty. The current media-created "literacy crisis" is largely based on the same wrong-headed assumptions, and faculties in the educational system for the first grade on up are simply reflecting the bias of our culture. But I do think it is possible to make some significant changes within our individual institutions and writing labs can be a focus for this change if we conceive of our purpose as not just the education of students but the education of faculty as well.